DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 875 PS 022 854

AUTHOR Katz, Lilian G.
TITLE Assessing the Development of Preschoolers. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Urbana, Ill.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-PS-94-15
PUB DATE Oct 94
CONTRACT RR93002007
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Affection; *Child Development; Childhood Interests; Curiosity; Eating Habits; *Evaluation Criteria; Friendship; Play; *Preschool Children; Sleep
IDENTIFIERS Authority; *Developmental Assessment; Emotional Expression; ERIC Digests; Toilet Training

ABSTRACT

To help parents address those aspects of their child's development which may need special encouragement, support, or intervention, this digest delineates 11 categories of behavior for assessment. Parents should not be alarmed if their children are having difficulty in only a few categories, and they should not judge their children's permanent behavior based on 1 day's observation. The categories are: (1) sleeping habits; (2) eating habits; (3) toilet habits; (4) range of emotions; (5) friendship; (6) variations in play; (7) responses to authority; (8) curiosity; (9) interest; (10) spontaneous affection; and (11) enjoyment of the "good things in life." Concerning these categories, parents should ask whether their child usually falls asleep easily and wakes up rested; eats with appetite; has bowel and bladder control, especially during the day; shows the capacity for a range of emotions over a period of time; initiates and maintains satisfying relationships with peers; varies his or her play and adds different elements to the play; accepts adult authority; exhibits curiosity and adventure; becomes absorbed and interested in something outside him- or herself; expresses spontaneous affection for caregivers; and enjoys the pleasures of childhood. The first 3 of the 11 categories are particularly sensitive indicators of children's well-being because the child has control of them. The other criteria are more culture-bound. When children are having problems with some of these areas of development, they can sometimes be helped when adults simply spend more time with them, or when the children's daily routines are simplified. (BC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education

University of Illinois • 805 W. Pennsylvania Ave. • Urbana, IL 61801-4897
(217) 333-1386 • (800) 583-4135 • ericeece@ux1.cso.uiuc.edu

ERIC DIGEST
October 1994 • EDO-PS-94-15

ED 372 875

Assessing the Development of Preschoolers

Lilian G. Katz

It is only natural for parents to wonder occasionally if the development of their preschooler is going well. Questions such as, Is my child doing what he or she is supposed to at this age? and, Do all four-year-olds behave this way in the same situations? reflect a natural desire to be sure the child is progressing normally. Over the years, psychologists have developed many normative scales to indicate how an individual child compares with others of a given age in similar populations.

This digest focuses on the question of individual growth, namely, Is the individual child's development going so well that he or she can be described as thriving? As parents look at their own young children's behavior and achievements on the categories outlined below, they can address the question, What aspects of my child's development need special encouragement, support, or intervention right now?

Categories of Behavior To Assess

In the course of development, ups and downs are inevitable even for children whose physical and mental endowments are normal. Occasionally children require intervention to get them successfully through a "down" period. Parents can observe behaviors in the eleven categories listed below during periods when they suspect a bit of a downturn. Keep in mind that difficulties in any single category are no cause for alarm. Indeed, difficulties in several categories do not imply irreversible problems; rather, they help us notice those periods when the child's life situation, for many possible reasons, is a bit out of adjustment with his or her emerging needs.

For three-year-olds, a look at their behavior on the following criteria for a period of about three weeks is desirable. For four-year-olds, four weeks should give a reliable picture of the quality of the child's life. At five years, add another week, and so forth. Be careful not to judge their permanent behavior based on one day's observation! All of us—children and adults—have the occasional really bad day!

1. Sleeping Habits

Does the child usually fall asleep easily and wake up rested, ready to get on with life? Occasional restless nights, nightmares, or grouchy mornings are all right. The average pattern of deep sleep resulting in morning eagerness is a good sign that the child experiences life as satisfying. Frequent insomnia or morning grouchiness for three or four weeks may indicate that a child is trying to cope with excessive stress, and a modification in life style might be tried.

2. Eating Habits

Does the child usually eat with appetite? Occasional skipping of meals or refusal of food is to be expected. Sometimes a child is too busy with absorbing activities to bother with food at mealtimes. Also, remember that children may eat a lot at one meal and hardly anything at the next. However, a preschooler who for several weeks eats as though famine were around the corner or who constantly fusses about the menu or picks at the food may be asking for comfort.

3. Toilet Habits

Does the child have, on the average over several weeks, bowel and bladder control, especially during the day? Occasional "accidents" are all right, particularly under special circumstances, such as excessive intake of liquids, intestinal upset, or an intense concentration with ongoing activity so that the child is too absorbed to attend to such "irrelevancies." Children who sleep well often take longer to stay continent at night.

4. Range of Emotions

Does the child show the capacity for a range of emotions such as joy, anger, sorrow, grief, enthusiasm, excitement, frustration, love, and affection? These need not be exhibited all in one day, of course, but should be seen over several weeks. A child whose emotions don't vary—who is always angry or sour or enthusiastic—may be in trouble. Note that expressions of sadness are not necessarily problematical; in appropriate situations, they can indicate the ability to really care about others.

5. Friendship

Can the child initiate and maintain satisfying relationships with one or more peers? A child who often plays alone is not experiencing a developmental problem as long as the cause is not insufficient social competence. A child who is fearful of peers or who frequently claims superiority over others may be seeking reassurance or may doubt his or her ability to meet parents' lofty expectations.

6. Variations in Play

Does the child's play vary, and does the child add elements to the play, even though the play is with the same toys or materials? A child who ritualistically and repetitively goes through the same sequence of play, with the same

PS 022854

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

elements and in the same way, may be emotionally "stuck in neutral," indicating perhaps that the child has insufficient inner security to "play with the environment."

7. Responses to Authority

Does the child usually accept adult authority? Occasional resistance, self-assertion, protest, and objections, when followed by ultimate yielding to the adult, indicate healthy socialization processes. Unfailing acceptance of adult demands and restrictions without a peep suggest excessive anxiety.

8. Curiosity

Does the child occasionally exhibit curiosity, adventure, and even mischief? A child who never pries or snoops where forbidden may not be pushing against perceived boundaries enough for healthy development or may fear punishment excessively. On the other hand, frequent manifestation of these behaviors may indicate a search for boundaries.

9. Interest

Does the child occasionally become involved, absorbed, and interested in something outside of him- or herself? The emphasis here is on sustained involvement in "activities" rather than in "passivities" such as television. A preschooler who cannot become absorbed in an activity or who rarely stays with a project until completion may need help.

10. Spontaneous Affection

Does the child express spontaneous affection for one or more of those responsible for his or her care? Note that this criterion refers to spontaneous declarations of love, not such displays as the required goodnight kiss. Also, demonstrations of affection vary among families and cultures and must be taken into account on this criterion. Nevertheless, in culturally appropriate ways, a child who is thriving is likely occasionally to express affection toward caretakers and deep pleasure in being with them. Excessive expressions of this kind, however, may signal doubts about the feelings caretakers have toward the child.

11. Enjoyment of the "Good Things of Life"

Does the child enjoy the "good things of life?" For young children, playing with others; going to picnics, parties, festivals, and new places; and exploring new toys are parts of the good life. If a child has a problem such as shyness, fear of dogs, or food dislikes, but the problem is not so severe that it prevents him or her from enjoying childhood pleasures, then assume that the child will outgrow the problem. If, however, problems do prevent enjoyment of the good things of childhood, help is called for.

Suggestions for Intervention

The first three of these eleven criteria of sound development—sleeping, eating, and toilet habits—are particularly sensitive indicators of the child's well-being because only the child has control of them. The other criteria are more culture-bound and situationally determined. When the pattern of a child's behavior on about half of the criteria seems less than optimum over a period of about a month, some remedial action should be taken.

While each individual case will require its own special intervention, some general approaches are worth trying right away. For example, no matter what the underlying cause, almost all young children respond well to spending time alone with an adult who is important to them. The important adult may be a parent, relative, caregiver, or anyone else with whom the child has a significant relationship. The time can be spent walking around the block, helping to tidy up a closet, gardening, baking a cake, or doing anything else the child really enjoys. The activity should be simple; it need not be an exotic trip to a faraway place. The main point is having someone special all to oneself. A few minutes a day for a few weeks will invariably help alleviate whatever stresses the child has encountered. Once the level of stress is reduced and the child is more relaxed, he or she may then become more responsive to a parent's guidance and suggestions about how to cope with the problem at hand.

In some cases a child's development can get back on track when his or her daily routines are simplified. Many preschoolers have a hard time coping with frequent, rapid, changes in environments within a day or week in which they are expected to be responsive and cooperative, to exercise self-control, and to be self-sufficient. For such children, reducing the number and rate of changes can go a long way to helping them "get back on the right foot."

For More Information

Bruce, T. (1993). For Parents Particularly: The Role of Play in Children's Lives. *Childhood Education* 69(4, Summer): 237-238. EJ 465 878.

Gilkerson, D. (1992). *Helping Children Develop Socially and Emotionally.* Brookings, SD: Cooperative Extension Service, South Dakota State University. ED 356 066.

Katz, L.G. and D. McClellan. (1990). *The Teacher's Role in the Social Development of Young Children.* Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.

McKenzie, T.L., J.F. Sallis, P.R. Nader, T.L. Patterson, J.P. Elder, C.C. Berry, J.W. Rupp, C.J. Atkins, M.J. Buono, J.A. Nelson. (1991). BEACHES: An Observational System for Assessing Children's Eating and Physical Activity Behaviors and Associated Events. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 24(1, Spring): 141-151. EJ 429 936.

Saunders, S.A. and V. Green. (1993). Evaluating the Social Competence of Young Children: A Review of the Literature. *Early Child Development and Care* 87:39-46. EJ 473 175.

References identified with an ED (ERIC document) or EJ (ERIC journal) number are cited in the ERIC database. Most documents are available in ERIC microfiche collections at more than 825 locations worldwide, and can be ordered through EDRS: (800) 443-ERIC. Journal articles are available from the original journal, interlibrary loan services, or article reproduction clearinghouses, such as: UMI (800) 732-0616; or ISI (800) 523-1850.

This publication was funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. DERR93002007. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI. ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced.